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ABSTRACT

Seven combined or multi-grade classes, ranging from grades 2 to 5, were the focus of a qualitative, naturalistic inquiry. In each of the four elementary schools visited for the study, the decision to have combined classes had been made shortly before school started for administrative reasons. The study sought to determine the manner in which the teachers organized their combined classes, the nature of teachers' feelings about this organization, and factors that contributed to making combination classes a positive experience for the teachers. Data were collected by means of observations and interviews of the seven participating teachers. The major organizational decisions for all teachers concerned when and how to combine instruction. Those teachers who were most satisfied with their instructional organization were also most satisfied with their combination classroom experiences. Factors that affected the manner in which the teachers organized their classrooms were their county's individualized teaching philosophy, the teachers' varying views of mandated curricula, and the atmosphere of the school and surrounding community. To make combined classrooms a positive experience, the teachers recommended: (1) open communication among administrators, teachers, and parents; (2) approaching the class as a community of learners; and (3) employing innovative teaching methods and original thematic and integrated units. A literature review is included. (AC)

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Jackson County Teachers and the Combined Classroom Experience:

A Naturalistic Inquiry of Combination Classroom Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The following article describes a qualitative, naturalistic inquiry of seven combined classes in Jackson County in a mid-Atlantic state (ranging in grades from 2 to 5). A combined or multi-grade classroom is one in which students in two or more grades are assigned to the same teacher in the same classroom. The purpose of the study is to describe the manner in which Jackson County elementary teachers organize their classes as well as how they feel about this organization and to subsequently discover the factors that contribute to making combination classes a positive experience for these teachers. Data was collected by observing and interviewing the seven participating teachers.

The major organizational decision for all teachers was when and how to combine instruction for the two grades. Those teachers who were most satisfied with their instructional organization were most satisfied with their combination classroom experiences. Factors that affect the manner in which a teacher organizes his/her classroom were found to be: Jackson County's individualized teaching philosophy, varying views of mandated curricula, and the atmosphere of the school and surrounding community. Recommendations for positive combined classroom experiences include: communicating openly between and among administration, teachers, and parents; approaching the class as a community of learners and down-playing grade-names; employing

innovative teaching methods by developing original thematic and integrated units.

INTRODUCTION

The following paper presents the findings of a three-month study of seven combination classes in Jackson County in a mid-Atlantic state. Jackson County spans a 739.2 square mile area, and a majority of its acreage consists of privately owned farms. Its schools are nestled snugly among rolling hills, and they serve a population that is made up of primarily middle-income Caucasian families. During my teaching associate[1] experience in a second/third grade combined classroom, I became increasingly aware of the challenges of teaching a combined class, and this awareness piqued my interest in multi-grade classroom organization.[2] As I found out more about the use of combination classes in Jackson County schools, I discovered a rich reservoir of differing educational philosophies and fundamental questions about elementary class structure. As a result, I capitalized on my own curiosities about combination classes and my desire to provide information to the combination classroom teachers in the

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[1]The university I attend features a three-month practicum for its education students. I taught in two different placements for seven weeks each.

[2]For the purposes of this study, the terms combined class and multi-grade class will be used interchangeably. These terms are defined as a type of classroom organization within the graded system that features students of two or more grades in the same room with the same teacher.

county by conducting a qualitative inquiry of combination classes in Jackson County elementary schools.

The purpose of this study is to describe the manner in which combination classroom teachers in Jackson County elementary schools organize their classes as well as how they feel about this organization. From these descriptions, the factors that contribute to making combination classes a positive experience for Jackson County teachers will be discovered. These descriptions are based on data collected by observing and interviewing seven combination classroom teachers (grades 2-5) in the county. The protocol for interviews matched observation format in that I selected several broad categories to cover, and I planned to obtain information in these categories through both observations and interviews.

I began this study with many preconceived ideas about what I would find. First, I believed that teachers of combination classrooms would tend to individualize instruction because of the vast range of abilities in their classes. I suspected that teachers would teach the grades together for language arts due to the workshop format used in Jackson County but would probably separate the grades for other content areas (see appendix A). However, I also had a feeling that because Jackson County does so strongly embrace developmental/individualized teaching, the teachers would attempt to de-emphasize grade-level as much as possible.

This study will be beneficial to educators because there is

insufficient information published about combination classes, yet school systems often choose to employ this organization because of shifting enrollment. Upon reviewing the literature, I found that most articles outlined ways in which to organize combination classes based on traditional, structured classes (i.e., the teacher follows the textbook). Performing a study of combination classes in Jackson County reveals new information because this county gives teachers much instructional freedom, including freedom from textbooks. Thus, Jackson County teachers have many important decisions to make concerning their classroom organization. This paper will discuss these decisions as well as implications for future decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Until 1835, all schools in the United States were completely ungraded (Shearer, 1899). William Shearer points out some of the advantages of this organization in his 1899 publication entitled The Grading of Schools. A distinct advantage of the one-room school house is that teaching is "directed toward the individual," and encourages independent learning (Shearer, 1899, p.13). The problems that Shearer (1899) describes as being inherent in this style of teaching include time restraints on the teacher, endless repetition of important information to each individual, and harrowing discipline problems.

Graded Schools Emerge

As the number of children in schools increased and communities decided to employ more than one teacher, the idea of

graded schools began to take hold. The first graded schools in America appeared around 1835 (Shearer, 1899). Educators at this time believed that a teacher could work more efficiently when teaching whole groups of students at one time, and the most logical way of grouping seemed to be by age. The educators assumed that similar age denotes similar achievement, for "the philosophy of grouping children into grades was based upon the assumption that greater learning takes place when children of similar achievement are in the same classes" (Rule, 1983, p.3). The act of grading schools is based on the assumption that "specific subject matter and skills can be developed and graded in a set sequence" (Rule, 1983, p.16). As the phenomenon of graded schools became the norm, graded textbooks began to appear; "norms" developed for each age level, and American education has been entrenched in this pattern of organization ever since (Rule, 1983, p.14).

The graded school did have many administrative advantages, for it was much easier for a teacher to teach a group of 25 students as one than attempting to teach each individual separately. Classroom management and preparation became much easier (Shearer, 1899). However, it was just these administrative efficiencies that caused many to question the graded organization. Critics of this system felt that "the graded school system was driven by a need for managing large numbers of students rather than for meeting individual student needs" (Miller, 1989, p.X). Shearer (1899) stresses the lack of

individualization and absurdity of the graded system by pointing out that if educators treated physical development as they did mental, in an age-graded system of physical development, "those naturally tall must gradually be compressed, and those naturally short must go through a stretching process, so that all may come up to the desired average" by the end of a given year (p.27). Shearer (1899) is against an educational system that does not "accommodate itself to the pupils, but demands that pupils accommodate themselves to it" (p.23).

Alternatives to Grading

Objection to graded schools emerged as soon as they came into existence, and as a result, educators concerned about grading have continually attempted to find satisfactory alternative arrangements. Beginning around 1900, many schools organized themselves in a manner that would allow students to progress through the grades at their own pace (Rule, 1983). For example, the Cambridge plan organized a nine-year elementary school so that students could complete grades four to nine in five to eight years. In the 1930's, the non-graded school movement began. In non-graded schools, "grades and grade labels were replaced by continuous progress" (Rule, 1983, p.19). However, this type of organization did not spread to a great number of schools. The idea of multi-grading, an organization in which students maintained grade-level names but were placed in rooms with other grades, was considered by many "as a clear improvement over single grading" in the years ranging from 1930-

1970 (Rule, 1983, p.21). Multi-grading was espoused because "it had the advantage of providing an organization that tends to emphasize the individual differences while the use of grade labels provides a nomenclature familiar to parents" (Rule, 1983, p.21). Franklin (cited in Rule 1983) described the philosophy of multi-grading as proposed in the 1960's as the following:

> The multi-grade plan is based on the assumption that students are better off when they are placed in a class on the basis of their differences rather than their likenesses with sub-grouping within the class (p.21).

Multi-Grading Today

Today there exist two major reasons for embracing a multi-grade system of organization, reasons of demographics and reasons of philosophy. Many schools, especially in rural areas, choose to have multi-grade classrooms in order to "equalize teacher loads and to reduce teacher costs" (Bienvenu, 1955, p.33); these are reasons resulting from numbers and administrative decisions. "For most rural educators, multi-grade instruction is not an experiment or a new educational trend, but a forceful reality based on economic and geographic necessity" (Miller, 1989, p.XII). Other schools, perhaps spurred on by number problems, decide to embrace multi-grade organization based on strong philosophical reasons. Such reasons include flexibility of scheduling that allows programs to fit individual students' needs as well as "ample opportunity for students to become resourceful and independent learners" (Miller, 1989, p.XII). These schools

typically have a multi-grade strain (i.e., grades 1-3) in which students remain with the same teacher for several years.

For example, the principal of a rural mountain school of 175 students and nine teachers decided to espouse multi-grade organization to solve problems of "number and age distributions of students not fitting the teaching staff" and to provide "enrichment for rural students" (Holman, Holden, Baren, 1989, p.5). The philosophy behind this program is based on the view that while "single-graded classes emphasize relatively small differences in students" and make those differences "unacceptable," multi-graded classes capitalize on "obvious" differences to make them more "acceptable" (Holman, Holden, Baren, 1989, p.12). The principal reorganized the school so that three teachers would teach single-grade classes for first, second, and third grades, and three other teachers would teach multi-grade classes combining grades 1 to 3. Parents and students were able to choose which system to participate in, and those entering the multi-graded system "begin at the level in which they function" (Holman, Holden, Baren, 1989, p.6). The teachers in the multi-grade classes at this school espouse a child-centered philosophy and are willing to try new ways of teaching. The teachers use a literature-based curriculum and build a social problem-solving, non-competitive atmosphere in their rooms.

Quantitative Studies

The principal, teachers, and students at the above school

found the multi-grade setting to be extremely effective, and in the end, "the participants reconceptualized the structure of the classroom and curriculum to take advantage of student variability" (Holman, Holden, Baren, 1989, p.1). In fact, in a majority of quantitative studies that have been conducted concerning multi-grade classrooms, researchers find that students perform just as well if not better than their same-age counterparts in single-grade classrooms. "In eight studies (Direr, 1949; Adams, 1953, Way, 1969, Harvey, 1974; Adair, 1978; MacDonald and Wurster, 1974; Lincoln, 1981; Pratt and Treacy, 1986 cited in Miller, 1989, p. 6), researchers found no difference between student performance in the multigrade or single-grade classroom. Milburn (1981) found the lower-level students in a multi-grade class to have better developed vocabularies than their same-age counterparts in single-grade classrooms. Hull (1958) states that in 46 of 48 statistical comparisons between single-grade and multi-grade students, multi-grade pupils show greater gains in personal and social adjustment as well as in social maturity and behavior characteristics. Hull (1958) also found "improvement in the creative personality of the teacher (p.33). After reviewing 21 studies that compare multi-grade and single-grade classrooms, Miller (1989) found "no negative academic or social effects of multigrade classes," and he considers multi-grade classes as a "viable and equally effective organizational alternative to single-grade classes" (13).

Qualitative Studies

Several qualitative studies have also been conducted on multi-grade classes. Delforge and Delforge (1990) conducted a study in rural North Carolina entitled, "What Rural Combination Classroom Teachers Say about Teaching Combination Classes." Delforge and Delforge (1990) sent out surveys to rural combination classroom teachers and the following list highlights pertinent findings from these surveys:

1. 65% of combined classroom teachers would not like to teach them again, yet 70% said that they felt that students in combination classes perform just as well academically and socially as their counterparts in single-grade rooms.
2. 55% feel that parents do not like the situation.
3. 69% think that their students like being in a combined class.
4. 51% said that they believe that cooperation is better in combination classroom, yet 54% feel that students should be kept apart for instruction (p. 5-7).

The researchers found three terms that had almost unanimous opinions: 1. Universities did not prepare them to teach combination classes. 2. Combination class teachers should be given an aide and a pay bonus. 3. School divisions do not have adequate in-service training for combination class teachers (Delforge, Delforge, 1989, p.9). Finally, the researchers found that those teachers who did enjoy teaching combination classes

integrated instruction and mixed grades for instruction (Delforge, Delforge, 1989).

Bandy (cited in Miller, 1989) researched the characteristics and needs of rural teachers in British Columbia, Canada by surveying 50 principals and 500 teachers. The majority of principals viewed the most important characteristic of a multi-grade teacher to be his/her ability to plan and to organize. The top three advantages that principals found in the multi-grade system were: individualized instruction, cross-age tutoring, and teacher innovation. The teachers surveyed felt that while teaching multi-grade classes, it was more difficult to aid the individual student and to plan for instruction. Eighty-five percent of the teachers believed the most difficult task to be "planning social studies and science without repetition" (Miller, 1989, p.17). These teachers also voiced the need for multi-grade training.

Pratt and Treacy (cited in Miller, 1989) researched multi-grade classrooms in Austria by conducting teacher interviews. They found that in general the teachers did not like the graded system; however, teachers also expressed that the multi-graded classroom was more work because principals conveyed the message that "each grade needed to be planned for and taught separately" (Miller, 1989, p.24). The schools in the study selected students that they felt could "handle" the situation in the multi-grade classes. The teachers stated that the greatest benefit that the students in these classes received was the ability to work

independently. They also felt that the older students in the classes benefitted from higher self-esteem as a result of serving as examples to the younger students. Teachers pointed out that the three main disadvantages for students were: students did not receive enough individual teacher time; older students may be treated like the younger students; students were isolated from students at the same grade level in the rest of the school. Pratt and Treacy did 14 classroom observations, and found that in all but one school, "teachers took deliberate measures so that students knew what grade they were in" (i.e., called by level, physically separated) (Miller, 1989, p. 26). In all schools, single-grade classes were dominant. In single-grade classes whole class instruction took up approximately 83% of class time while in a multi-graded room, 37% of class time was whole class, instruction, and 44% was made up of work done in grade-level groups. Pratt and Treacy found that most teachers planned closed tasks (convergent) aimed at the middle ability student. They came up with the following recommendations following their study:

1. Expectations regarding amount of preparation and curriculum planning needs to be clarified for teachers. It would be beneficial if teachers were encouraged to plan for joint grade instruction; teachers should not be required to write out two separate plans.
2. Teachers should be given more preparation time.
3. Teachers should be trained in cooperative learning.
4. Steps should be taken to ensure that students won't

repeat information in subsequent years.

5. It should not be insisted that the two grades remain separate.

6. Teachers need to be trained before taking on a multigrade class (Miller, 1989, p.27).

Suggestions for Multi-Grade Teachers

Bruce Miller (1989) acted upon his research on multi-grade classes and compiled information in his book entitled The Multi-Grade Classroom: A Resource handbook for Small , Rural Schools. In the opening of the book, Miller (1989) outlines the characteristics that he considers necessary for a successful multigrade teacher. These include:

1. Well-organized, creative and flexible.
2. Willing to work hard, resourceful and self-directed.
3. Willing to work closely with the community.
4. Having a strong belief in the importance of cooperative and personal responsibility in the classroom with the ability to develop these characteristics in students.
5. Having prior successful experience in the grade level to be taught (p.46).

Miller (1989) sites the following practices that have naturally emerged from multigrade classes: "interdependency, cooperation, multiple task activities, individualized learning, and heterogenous grouping" (p.133). Miller (1989) also states that at the multi-grade conference in 1989 in Oregon, several teachers said that they found cross-grade grouping to allow for more

instructional flexibility than traditional grade segregated groups did.

Miller (1989) suggests that divergent discussions and individualized learning are most effective for multi-grade classes. Divergent discussions are ideal for whole-class discussions in multi-grade classes because these discussions are open to many ideas and no comment is viewed as "right" or "wrong." Individualized learning, in which teachers teach each child according to her/his interests and abilities, is especially effective with a teacher who works with small groups of students and must ensure that other students are engaged in valuable activities (Miller, 1989). However, Good and Brophy (cited in Miller, 1989) warn against using individualized instruction if it means that students will be spending most of their time working alone. "What this means for the multi-grade teacher is a need to maintain a central role in student learning, but one that enhances and encourages the development of self-direction and responsibility without abdicating responsibility to student learning" (Miller, 1989, p.172). In fact, Miller (1989) suggests that multi-grade teachers should not always teach grades separately, for when grades are always separated, a status hierarchy often develops between the grades. When teachers use whole-class instruction, this hierarchy is replaced by a cooperative atmosphere. Miller (1989) suggests the following activities for multi-age classrooms:

-speaking before the group (sharing, speeches, etc.)

-enhancing ideas during group discussion

-unit introductions and reviews followed by level specific materials

-demonstrations of experiments

-dramatic presentations and stories

-problem solving games

-managerial issues

-sponge/anticipatory activities (p.179-80)

If the teacher finds that teaching to small groups in some instances is more effective, Miller (1989) suggests that grouping should be flexible "because research has consistently demonstrated that ability groups receive unequal treatment and esteem with the lower performing students receiving most negative effects" (p.186). The disadvantages of using extensive grouping procedures in addition to harmful student perceptions are increased planning for the teacher as well as possible boredom and restlessness for students. Miller (1989) suggests that teachers jump "across grade boundaries" and find "mutual problems" among students and then teach a lesson to them. Dryer (cited in Miller, 1989) suggests that teachers find curricular objectives that over-lap across grade levels and to combine instruction accordingly. Finally, Miller (1989) recommends use of cooperative learning strategies in multi-grade classes. Miller (1989) advocates the use of cross-age tutoring, for tutoring benefits the tutor as well as the tutee.

Another extremely valuable source of information about

combination classes comes from articles written by the teachers themselves. The vignettes below highlight information from three of these articles.

Jayne Freeman and Multilevel Students

Jayne Freeman expresses the joy that she found in her combination class in her article "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love my Combination Class." In this article, she describes her 3-4 combination class in which she attempts to integrate the grades as much as possible. She organizes most of her lessons by beginning with open activities with the whole class and then moving on to more closed, level-specific activities. Ms. Freeman (1984) states that her "students are coming to think of themselves as multilevel people who need help with some things and are able to give help with others" (p.48). Ms. Freeman (1984) suggests that combination teachers keep their students' parents informed of his/her teaching methods and goals. She says that a teacher should inform parents that he/she will treat "each child as an individual with strengths and weaknesses, regardless of the grade-level label of the class" (p.51). Finally, Ms. Freeman (1984) states that the most rewarding part of the arrangement is that the "class became like a family" (p.51).

Yvonne Siu-Funyan and Whole language

Yvonne Siu-Funyan (1991) talks about whole language and the multi-grade class in her article "Learning from Students." She taught grades 3 to 6 in a mountain school in a community of approximately 200 people. In the article, she discusses three

aspects of holistic teaching that helped her overcome the challenges of multi-grade teaching. These are: the way that she and her students cooperatively organized their time, how she learned from students what to teach and when, and the kind of language that she used when talking about reading and writing (Siu-Funyan, 1991). Siu-Funyan (1991) suggests that a teacher be a kid watcher and allow the students to guide his/her instruction methods. She writes,

> applying holistic language principles means that we must know what to look for and how to evaluate what we observe. We need to let our students guide and inform us about what to teach, when to teach and in what context" (p.102).

Charles Kingsland and Individualization

Charles Kingsland (Wolfe, 1990) who teaches in a one-room school in Alaska says that individualization is the key to multi-age teaching. He states the following five principals when talking about his own teaching:

1. The student, not the content, is a vehicle for the learning process.
2. The written word must be adapted to fit reading levels, interests, and/or needs.
3. Accountability and responsibility are encouraged to maintain standards.
4. Correlation of subject matter, not fragmentation and isolation.

5. Use of local and/or current events as a basis for building concepts (Wolfe, 1990, p.5).

Summary

Multi-grading is a type of educational organization that arises within and as a result of the traditional graded system in American schools. A multi-graded or combined classroom is one in which students from two or more grade levels are assigned to the same class with the same teacher. Quantitative research on multi-grade classes does not report negative impacts on student's academic or social achievement in multi-grade classes. In fact, several studies report advantages for students who are in multi-grade classes (i.e., positive student attitude toward school, and enriched vocabularies for lower grade-level students). Teaching a multi-grade class within a graded system is challenging because of grade-level expectations that accompany the graded plan. Teachers are faced with important decisions to make about what to teach to whom. Qualitative studies report that teachers feel that they need special training and support while teaching a combination class. Studies have also found that teachers who are creative, flexible, resourceful, and who are willing to combine instruction for both grades are the most successful and the most satisfied with their combined class. Researchers encourage teachers to individualize their teaching as well as to combine instruction by beginning lessons by discussing broad themes/concepts in a divergent manner and then by moving in to more level-specific tasks. Teachers who have had multi-grade

classes feel that individualizing instruction while simultaneously creating a family-like atmosphere in the room are keys to successful multi-grade teaching.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study is to qualitatively describe combined classes in Jackson county. After conducting a review of existing literature on the subject of combined classes, I pinpointed several categories that became the structure for my interviews and observations. In his book The Professional Stranger, Michael Agar (1980) suggests that the ethnographer may "make a compilation of categories of activities. . . and work up informal interviews based on those" (p. 107). I followed this advise and conducted my interviews on a very informal level. In fact, my observations and interviews closely intermingled during my visits to the schools. Agar (1980) states, "observation and interview mutually interact with each other, either simultaneously or sequentially, in the course of doing ethnography" (p.109). As I visited with the teachers, I wanted to get their candid views of the situation, and I did not want to impose my views upon them. As a result, I began my interviews by asking the teachers to tell me their thoughts about combination classes, and then a natural conversation followed. As the teacher talked, I took notes on the observation/interview forms that I had made; I categorized these thoughts in a more exact manner after each visit with a teacher (see appendix B). In addition to interviews and observations, I also attended monthly meetings of the multi-age

support group that Ms. Ruth organized; I attended the meetings for January, February, and March. Ms. Ruth, Ms. West, and Mr. Smith were the only teachers to attend these meetings. I took notes on the proceedings and also shared my findings with these teachers when appropriate. Finally, after having written a rough draft of my study, I did member checks by having each teacher read over the sections concerning his/her classroom. During these member checks, I also asked each teacher to expound upon subjects that they had talked about in the original interviews, for I did not tape-record the original interviews and I found that I needed more direct quotes from the teachers. Thus, I tape-recorded the member check sessions, and when doing future studies, I will tape-record all interactions that I have.

The basic components of the study are as follows:

* Conduct review of existing literature.
* Locate combination classroom teachers (grades 2-5) in the county.
* Devise system of observation/interview based on review of literature and existing knowledge (see appendix B).
* Write letters to principals asking permission to contact teachers in their school about the study.
* After receiving permission, write teachers requesting their participation in the study.
* Call teachers and set up times for observations.
* Visit combination classes (see figure 1).

  -observe teachers in action and talk to teachers about

their classes.

* Organize field notes after each visit by categorizing what was seen and heard on the visit according to the interview/observation sheet developed earlier.
* Organize findings and interpret data by detecting themes that come naturally from data, and write rough draft of findings.
* Do member checks and tape-record teacher responses to and clarifications of what has been written about them.
* Attend three multi-age support group meetings.

Site	Teacher	Grade	Time Spent in Class
Site A	Mr. Smith	3-4	2 visits: 1 1/2 days
Site B	Ms. New	2-3	1 visit: 1/2 day
Site B	Ms. Hope	2-3	1 visit: 1/2 day
Site B	Ms. West	2-3	1 visit: 1/2 day
Site C	Ms. Maple	2-3	2 visits: 1 1/2 day
Site D	Mr. East	4-5	2 visits: 1 day
Site D	Ms. Ruth	2-3	teaching associateship

Figure 1. Field Visits

Site	Location	Size
A	Rural- near town of approx. 500	180 students, 9 teachers
B	Rural- surrounded by farms	181 students, 9 teachers
C	Rural- surrounded by lower-income homes	167 students, 8 teachers
D	Rural- country "suburb" of town of 42,800	461 students, 20 teachers

Figure 2. Site Demographics

Site	Population Characteristics	Racial Mix	General School Atmosphere
A	-lower-middle class -conservative parents -many students in broken homes or abusive home situations -lack of positive parental involvement	approx. 4% minority	controversy due to change of principals
B	-heterogeneous mix of socioeconomic levels -middle-class majority -positive parental involvement	approx. 10% minority	positive, cooperative atmosphere."It's a great school to work at."*
C	-student range from lower-middle class to poverty-stricken -positive parental involvement	approx. 30% minority	positive,relaxed and friendly atmosphere
D	-upper-middle class -positive and abundant parental involvement -homogeneous population	approx. 1% minority	positive atmosphere yet relatively high-stress

Figure 1. Site Characteristics/Atmosphere *Comment by Ms. Hope

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Jackson County

Jackson County is located in a mid-Atlantic state, and it spans a 739.2 square mile area. Agricultural production makes up a major proportion of the county's economy, for out of the total county land area of 472,960 acres, 213,298 acres are privately owned farms. Other basic economic contributors are in the areas of manufacturing, education, retail trade, travel trade, construction, and services. The county is home of a major American university as well as several famous historical sites. The population of Jackson County according to the 1990 census was 66,500 people; the estimated population for the year 2000 is 75,700. Nearly one fourth of the labor force in the area is classified as professional (engineers, physicians, teachers, etc.) while one third have managerial, sales, or clerical occupations, and over one half are engaged in white collar occupations (Jackson County Pamphlet, 1990).

Jackson County Schools

The Jackson County school system describes itself as "a growing rural/urban school system." It serves a student population of 10,150 in 15 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 3 high schools, and 1 technical education center. It boasts one of the lowest student/teacher ratios in its state (about 15:1) as well as a recently established "Teacher Career Incentive Model" which matches increased involvement and excellency with increased pay. Jackson County provides its teachers with abundant

opportunities to grow professionally. One of its mottoes states that it is a county "where teaching is an education." It features "unsurpassed offerings in: staff development opportunities, teacher career incentive program, cadre of professional education support staff, major university center, and ready access to [large mid-Atlantic cities]." (School pamphlet, 1992) The system's mission statement is: "We expect success." The Jackson County system gives its teachers much freedom in the classroom.

The Combined Class Decision at Each School

In each of the schools visited, the decision to have combined classes was based on administrative reasons and was made only a week or two before school started; however, each school approached the situation in a slightly different manner.

Site A

Site A's decision was based strictly on numbers. Student assignment to the class was random; however, Mr. Smith describes all three of the third graders in his class as "good readers." The administration informed parents about the combination "just before school started" and did not offer them the option to request or refuse the combination class. Mr. Smith, who was new to the system, felt "lost" when informed of this assignment because he did not know exactly what the Jackson County school system expected of him as a combined classroom teacher and as a teacher in general.

Site B

Site B's decision to have combination classes was based on administrative reasons but then strong philosophical beliefs grew up and around this decision. When the numbers made it clear that a combination class might be necessary, the principal and teachers involved convened to discuss the situation. The numbers fell so that if they decided to make one class a combination, it would contain mostly third graders and only five second graders. Ms. New says that they decided against this option because "research says that such uneven combinations are not effective." As a result, the teachers combined all the second and third grades so that each class would have a relatively even number of second and third graders. The school informed parents of this situation and held an open-house two weeks before school started. Parents did not have the option to request or refuse the combination classes since all the second and third grade classes are combined.

Site C

Site C's decision was based on administrative reasons, and Ms. Maple was informed of the decision three weeks before school started. Parents were informed of the situation in a letter that was sent home on the first day of school. Ms. Maple was chosen to teach the class because she had requested to have the second graders that she had taught the year before for her supposed third grade class. Instead, she was assigned half the second graders from the year before and a group of new second graders who were randomly selected. She said that it was a great

advantage to already know all of her third graders.

Site D

Finally, site D's decision was also based on administrative reasons, and it was made one week before school started. Student placement in the classes was based on one of three reasons: the students were considered to be "mature" enough to "handle" the situation, parents had requested a teacher who had been assigned a combination, or the students arrived in the school district late in the summer. After the students were placed in the classes, the principal talked to each child's parents and asked them to consent to the placement; parents were given ample opportunity to refuse the placement (unless they arrived late in the summer or after school started when rearrangements could not be made). The school gave an open house before school started, and the parents met individually and as a group to talk about the situation with Ms. Ruth and Mr. East. Ms. Ruth says that she informed the parents that she "would work with them" as much as possible.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

After interviewing and observing seven combined classroom teachers in Jackson County, I found that the factor that most clearly differentiates one class from the next is the amount that each teacher combines grades for instruction. I also found that the teachers who are most comfortable with the manner in which they organize their instruction are the most positive about their experiences as combined classroom teachers. The following

paragraphs discuss how each teacher organizes his/her combination class (see figure 4). I also include each teacher's views about teaching combinations in the future because I consider these views to be indicative of their feelings about their present situation (see figure 4).

Mr. Smith

Mr. Smith began the year teaching his third and fourth grade students separately; however, he quickly found this method of organization to be time-consuming and frustrating, and he was not satisfied with his classroom. He now combines instruction for all areas of the curriculum. The third and fourth graders sit in direct proximity to their same-grade classmates, yet the desks are arranged in a u-shape that brings everyone together as a whole. Mr. Smith has three third graders and 16 fourth graders in his class. Mr. Smith reflects that the arrangement is "not ideal," but that he is doing the best that he can. He says that he would not mind having another combined class because he wants to continue working on classroom organization until it "feels right."

Ms. West, Ms. Hope, Ms. New, and Ms. Maple

The teachers at site B have completely combined instruction since the beginning of the school year, and Ms. Maple at site C combines instruction in all areas except mathematics. The students in these classes do not sit in grade groups, and the teachers never refer to students by grade name. These teachers are comfortable with their classroom organization, and they all

say that they would not mind having combined classes again in the future. Similarly, in their survey of rural combined classroom teachers in North Carolina, Delforge and Delforge (1990) found that teachers who mixed grades for instruction most enjoyed teaching combined classes.

Mr. East and Ms. Ruth

Mr. East and Ms. Ruth at site D approach their classroom organization in different manners. Mr. East separates his fourth and fifth graders for most instruction. The students sit with their same-grade group, and Mr. East often calls them by their grade name. Mr. East says that he would "probably not" like to teach a combination class in the future, but if he did, he would like it to be organized like the class that he is presently teaching. In Ms. Ruth's class, the second and third graders sit in direct proximity to their same-grade classmates, yet the desks are arranged in a u-shape that brings everyone together as a whole. She occasionally refers to the groups by their grade-name labels. She teaches everything together except for handwriting, math, and certain social studies units (will be discussed in more detail later in the paper). Ms. Ruth says that she would not mind teaching a combined class again; however, if she did, she would combine the students for all areas of the curriculum.

Teacher	Language Arts	Math	Science	Social Studies	Student Seating
Mr. Smith	Combined	Combined	Combined	Combined	Grouped by grade
Ms. Hope Ms. New Ms. West	Combined	Combined	Combined	Combined	Grades Mixed
Ms. Maple	Combined	Separate	Combined	Combined	Grades Mixed
Mr. East	Separate	Separate	Mostly Combined	Separate	Grouped by grade
Ms. Ruth	Combined	Separate	Combined	Mostly Combined	Grouped by grade

Figure 4. To Combine or Not to Combine Instruction

Factors Involved in Organizational Decision

A major factor involved in a teacher's satisfaction with his/her combined classroom is the manner in which he/she organizes the class. Those teachers whose classroom organization most closely reflects their teaching philosophy are the most comfortable with their situation. Thus, it would seem that a simple answer to the question of combined classes is that everyone should act upon his/her own philosophies and that subsequently all will be happy. Unfortunately, life in the school is not that simple, for teachers are in an extremely public arena, an arena with many factions, each with its own philosophy. After examining all the data collected from interviews and observations, it was found that there are three major factors that affect the manner in which a Jackson County

teacher organizes his/her combined class and the subsequent feelings he/she has about this organization. These factors are:

1. The county's prominent philosophy of instruction.
2. The individual teacher's view of mandated curricula.
3. The general atmosphere of the school and surrounding community.

Each of these factors will be discussed separately, yet one must remember that each is intricately intertwined and related to the other.

Jackson County Philosophy and Combined Classes

In his study of multi-grade classes, Bandy (cited in Miller, 1989) states that principals find one advantage of combined classes to be "individualized instruction" (p.17). The over-riding philosophy of teachers in Jackson County features this individualization that researchers find to be so important. Most Jackson County teachers embrace an individualized, student-centered and developmental approach toward teaching and learning. All the teachers in the study say that they teach according to an individualized/developmental philosophy. The teachers say that they ideally individualize just as much in straight-grade classes as they do in their combinations. As a result, these teachers have a distinct advantage over combined classroom teachers who do not have prior experience in individualizing instruction. In addition, Mr. East says that his combined class has in fact pushed him to individualize more. He says that this began as a "defensive" and "political" measure to fend off parental woes by

"everyday making sure to see how each student was doing." He states that this individualization is a positive outcome of having a combination class. Furthermore, Jackson County gives its teachers much instructional freedom; teachers are not tied exclusively to the curricula or to textbooks, and thus, they may be more apt to combine instruction than teachers in systems which allow less instructional freedom. This subject will be covered later in the section dealing with thematic units and combination classes.

Examples of Individualized and Student-Centered Teaching

Examples of this student-centered, individualized teaching style were evident in the observations. For example, every teacher used some form of a workshop approach to reading and writing instruction. Ms. Ruth stated that language arts posed no problems for her because she could teach a "first grader and a fifth grader" together using the individualized workshop model (see appendix A). During reading and writing workshops, students read books that they have chosen as well as write on topics of their choice. Students may work in pairs or small groups, but most of the work is independent. Thus, the teacher has time to spend with individual students. For example, while Ms. West's students were performing various activities during their workshop time, she circulated around the room helping individual students. She spent almost fifteen minutes with one child helping her to write a story. She later said that she feels that individualized teaching is effective because it gives a teacher time to work

one-on-one with students. She compared this to small group work in which the teacher spends lots of time with a machine running off work sheets for everyone to do. Mr. Smith also took advantage of writing workshop time to conference with individual students about their progress. A student's grade-level is inconsequential during reading and writing workshop because each student is working at his or her own level. Ms. Maple says that she uses workshop time to teach "mini-lessons" on certain skills involving reading or writing. As Miller (1989) suggests in his guide book, Ms. Maple crosses grade boundaries and teaches these skills to all students who need the instruction.

A fact that exemplifies the student-centered teaching of Jackson County teachers is that no teacher was ever seen to conduct a lesson by lecture or by direct teaching method during field visit observations. Students were always actively involved in the learning process. For example, the fifth graders in Mr. East's class taught their classmates about the first 13 states to become a part of the United States. All of Mr. Smith's students worked together to correct errors in an essay while simultaneously discussing the morality of zoos. Ms. Ruth's students wrote in their journals and then read books of their choice. Ms. New expresses her excitement about student-centered learning in the following anecdote:

> We want to write a class myth and put on a play, so today [our parent volunteer] was having [the students] tell ideas that they remember from each other's writing and

writing those ideas down to generate the core for this class play. And as they were doing that, she and I started saying, "Oh yea, now wouldn't that be neat?". . .We started taking over, and one of the kids said, "You guys are writing it!" Isn't that great? They caught us at it! We were so caught up in what we were saying and in our own ideas that we weren't listening to them. . .What was neat about it was that they didn't let us take over!

This method of student-centered teaching lends itself well to combined classes because students of all grades can become involved at their own level; a third grader does not fail because he/she cannot do the "third grade" work. He/she instead fits in at his/her own ability level and grows from there. It is also easier for the teacher who, instead of struggling to plan activities that students of all levels can do, allows the students to determine the direction that the lessons will take.

In his guidebook for combined classroom teachers, Miller (1989) suggests that multi-grade teachers should organize their classes much as these Jackson County teachers do. He states that combined classroom teachers are most successful when they organize a "multi-dimensional" class (p. 132). A multi-dimensional classroom is a class "in which there are many dimensions of intellectual competence;" a student is not judged solely by his/her reading level (Miller, 1989, p. 132).

A Multi-Dimensional, Multi-Grade Class in Jackson County

The Jackson County individualized and student-centered

philosophy of teaching leads to the establishment of multi-dimensional classes. An example of the way a teacher's philosophy affects her teaching was seen in Ms. New's class. When being observed, Ms. New's students were practicing plays in cooperative learning groups. Ms. New explained that she had not planned on doing plays but that this activity had grown naturally from the students themselves. She gives her students many choices of activities to do during her reading workshop time and among these choices are reading and performing plays. Several students became interested in doing a play, and the notion spread throughout the class. She says that when she sees something working well in her class that she "goes with it!" The students chose their own groups and the play that they wanted to perform; all these groups were cross-sex and cross-grade. Ms. New expressed her excitement about the plays when she explained how they had helped one student's self image. This student is not a strong reader; however, he diligently worked on memorizing his part and is one of the star actors in his play!

Instruction in Math, Science, and Social Studies

Individualized teaching comes most naturally for Jackson County combined classroom teachers in the area of language arts because of the workshop model that they follow (see appendix A). Problems arise in the more content-oriented areas of math, science, and social studies, and it is in these areas that questions about whether to teach the grades together or separately are most evident. A major factor involved in a

teacher's decision to teach together or separately is his/her view of state mandated curricula as well as the views of other teachers at the school.

Teachers at Site B and Curriculum Guides

Of the seven teachers in the study, the three teachers at Site B are the only ones to combine instruction across the entire curriculum for the entire year. Ms. Hope says that the three teachers "looked at the Standards of Learning[1] as a team in the beginning of the year and decided that they were so broad that they could be covered in any form." She goes on to say that "the SOLs are so broad and vague that we will do what is in them anyway. We use them as a guide." Ms. West reiterates the role of the curriculum as a guide when she says, "we must teach the child, not the subject or grade level." When describing the arbitrary character of grades, Ms. West says that expecting all second graders to perform at a similar level is as absurd as expecting all eight year-olds to have the same shoe size; Ms. West's analogy is quite similar Shearer's size analogy of 1899 (i.e., expecting all eight year-olds to be at the same developmental level is as absurd as expecting them to all be the same height). While Bandy (cited in Miller, 1989) found that a majority of combination classroom teachers worry about repetition of material from grade to grade, Ms. West feels that it is "not of prime importance" to worry about students covering material in

[1]The Standards of Learning (SOLs) are the state mandated curriculum guides for each subject at each grade level.

the second grade that is meant for the third grade. She explains:

> and the reason is that the next year you'll cover different things so that the students will not cover the same material two years in a row. And why will that happen? Because of communication. . .We are doing different units but we are paying attention to what the curriculum says that we're to have the kids cover. We are just approaching it in a different way. . . Curriculum guides are written so that you can use them either lock-step if you want to or you can use your curriculum guide, and you can teach it in any way that you want.

Thematic Units at Site B

The three teachers at site B organize their teaching in the content areas of social studies and science by devising thematic/integrated units[4]. The freedom granted to Jackson County teachers is seen in its prime as the teachers at site B design these units. They work together on some units while they also feel free to work on individual class projects. During the observations of these classes, they were finishing up a thematic unit on Mexico that all the classes did together. When talking about this theme, Ms. West says, "Mexico is not in the curriculum, and it is one of our nearest neighbors." The

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[4]Thematic/integrated units are units that are based on a single theme and that include lessons in all or several subject areas.

teachers at Site B chose the theme of Mexico because it is a neighbor of the United States and because several of the students in their classes are Mexican migrant workers' children. The teachers began the year by doing an extensive pirate unit together. Ms. New says that thematic units make teaching fun and interesting because she learns along with her students as she develops the materials for the units. Ms. New also feels that it is important that everyone gets to do the "neat" things that were reserved only for "gifted students" when she began her teaching career. Ms. Hope explains that social studies and science are combined in these units. For example, in the unit on pirates, the students learned about scurvy and the importance of vitamin C as well as how pirates impacted the state's history.

These three teachers determine the themes of their units; however, they then allow their students to determine the direction in which the theme will go. For example, in their Mexico unit, they opened their study by having their students brainstorm all that they would like to learn about Mexico. They then organized this list into a web of categories. The students then chose which category they would like to work on. The students interested in the same category formed a cooperative group whose assignment was to research the topic and to present their findings to the class. All the groups in each class were heterogeneous and cross-grade. Another example of this student-centered teaching was in Ms. West's class where she expects each student to take responsibility for his/her own learning. During

workshop time, some students were finishing their Mexico projects while others were working on a unit on sea creatures called "Sea Encounters." Ms. West says that after beginning the unit, a couple students approached her with the idea to make a sea mural. She gave them the responsibility to do this, and these students painted the background of the mural. The rest of the class was responsible for making sea creatures to place on the mural as well as writing reports and stories on these creatures. Each student in the class was working on something different, but each student was working diligently.

Site B and Mathematics

The three teachers at site B also combine instruction for mathematics. Ms. New says that math is the "most confusing" subject to teach to her combined class. She says that she tries to "individualize" instruction, but that sometimes the third graders are ahead of the others. She attempts to start with a theme and to individualize from there. Ms. West says that she talked to a teacher who had previously taught a 3-4 combination and that this teacher said that it is "impossible" to combine mathematics instruction for both grades. Ms. West is determined "to prove that it is possible!" She combines instruction by looking at the curricula for both grades and pinpointing overlapping concepts. She teaches the concept and then plans various activities with differing expectations for different levels. She also does many logic lessons with the class as a whole. Ms. Hope says that she precedes in a similar manner, by

teaching a concept and then moving to different levels (not based on grade but on developmental level!). She says that she also uses the "mini-lesson" concept that is a part of reading and writing workshops when helping students with math skills.

Ms. Maple, the Curriculum, and Thematic Units

Ms. Maple, who talks often to Ms. New about her class, combines instruction for all areas except mathematics. She views the curriculum as simply a guide to teaching, and she also uses thematic units to teach social studies and science. Some of the units that she devised and taught to her combination class are: explorers, pioneers, and the solar system. She devised all new units for this year because she had had her third graders last year, and she did not want them to repeat a theme. She says that her students "don't know if they are doing social studies or science," for they simply consider themselves to be working on activities for their themes. Ms. Maple is going to teach a unit on Jackson County to her class; this unit is a part of the third grade curriculum. She did not express great worry that the second graders will be prematurely covering part of the third grade curriculum. She said, "they will simply get 'Jackson County' again next year." Ms. Maple further explains,

> When we did the Jackson County unit, I didn't really worry about the second graders having it again in the third grade because they'll forget a lot over the summer, and they'll be a big help to teacher with the other students who have never been exposed

to it before!

Ms. Maple and Mathematics

Ms. Maple does separate mathematics instruction into same-grade groups; however, she says that she would have math groups even if she had a straight-grade class. She explains:

> I do separate math into two groups, but occasionally I might have some third graders who need to brush up on their addition and subtraction work with the second grade group, and then I might have some strong second graders that can work with multiplication in the third grade group. . . But I've never called them 'second graders come on up' or 'third graders come on up.' I've never referred to them as second or third graders. They are just Ms. Maple's students, and I think that that works out much better.

Ms. Maple said that she does not like separating the two grade groups. In fact, she said that she would rather teach a 1-2 combination "because they are more similar as far as curriculum and skills, and as a result, I would never have to separate them." She does worry about her third graders being ready for fourth grade in terms of skill acquisition. She explains:

> I gear a lot of the skills and content that I teach during readers and writers workshop to the third grade, so the second graders are getting a lot of stuff that they would not get until the following year. . .But I am concerned about my third graders with all the

writing in the fourth grade.

Mr. Smith and the Curriculum

Mr. Smith began the school year teaching all areas of the curriculum separately; however, he now combines instruction for all areas. He follows the fourth grade curriculum, for he only has three third graders in his class. He explains:

> Right now I have three third graders in here, and they're all doing fourth grade work in every subject. In these particular cases, the parents are all quite agreeable. . . They feel that it is a compliment to their situation, and the students are perfectly capable of doing it. . .[The third graders] are by all means not at the bottom. Two of them in fact excel in all areas above even fourth graders.

Mr. Smith does not extensively use thematic/integrated units in his teaching, but he said that he "would use them more, if I were more familiar with the curriculum." Mr. Smith is new to Jackson County, and he has spent much of this year acquainting himself with the system's expectations. Mr. Smith talks about his third graders facing the possible repetition of some material in the fourth grade,

> in social studies, I can't say that I will cover different experiences each year, but what I do cover will be picked up differently by each child, so we could do the Revolutionary War two years in a row, and you'll still gain from it. . . The student's learning

> will become just a little more sophisticated each time. Now, I can explain this to parent who is willing to listen to it, but I cannot explain that to a parent who doesn't want to hear it.

Mr. Smith says that he now firmly believes that the two grades should be taught together. He says that "you have a tremendous variable within any class even though they are all called x-graders, so the combination doesn't add anything different that you don't already really have if you legitimately look at it." Mr. Smith teaches math to the entire group as a whole and gives "enrichment" sheets to students who are at a higher developmental level than the rest, and in fact, all three of his third graders receive these enrichment sheets.

Mr. East and the Curriculum

Mr. East teaches most areas of the curriculum separately, including reading separate novels and teaching separate skills in language arts; however, he states that he has progressively done more combining of instruction throughout the year. He says "any good teacher will see benefits of working together as a whole class." He does much work with cross-age tutoring and cross-age buddy systems in his class, and he sees this as a definite benefit of a combination class.

Mr. East's students leave his class and go to homogeneous, same-grade classes for mathematics instruction which is a school-wide practice. For social studies and science instruction, he finds similar themes in the fourth and fifth grade curricula and

teaches them simultaneously, although he "usually has different lesson plans" for each group. In science, the two grades have worked together on such themes as: weather, electricity, and space. Mr. East explains his science instruction,

> The county science curriculum is very distinct. . . I tended to bring them together in the science because I felt like if they were going to be individualized and [taught developmentally], then I should go ahead and just do what they could do. For example, I have some fifth graders who really didn't get to do all aspects of the space unit last year in the fourth grade, and so I'm going to go ahead and let them do some of the projects that are going to be available for fourth graders.

Mr. East follows a similar thematic pattern in his social studies instruction too. In fact, as a beginning of the year activity to introduce his students to the workings of his combination class, he had them all inspect their social studies textbooks in order to find thematic correlations. He said that they "had a good laugh" about how similar the history curricula for the two grades are (i.e., state history for fourth graders and United States history for fifth graders). He then explained to the students that the two grades would be working on similar themes but with different expectations. For example, on the first observation of Mr. East's class, both grade-groups were beginning a unit on poetry. Mr. East planned to give each group

a hand-out that described various different forms of poetry; however, he went over the sheet first with the fifth graders and then with the fourth graders at a later date. He did this because the fourth graders were occupied doing independent work on their "autobiographies" which are a part of the fourth grade curriculum at their school. When going over the sheet with the fifth graders, Mr. East informed them that "you've done this in the fourth grade, so we'll just go over it quickly." After the lesson, he said that he would go over the sheet in much more detail with the fourth graders. Thus, although both grades were studying poetry, Mr. East handled their instruction in slightly different manners.

Mr. East teaches the groups separately because often it is the most convenient manner in which to organize his time. For example, the fifth graders at his school are members of the school chorus and are often out of the class for practice. Fourth graders are not chorus members so they remain in the class for instruction. Similarly, when the fourth graders go to their music class, the fifth graders are the only students in the room. Furthermore, Mr. East bases his decision on aspects of the curriculum. For example, on the second visit to Mr. East's class, the fourth and fifth graders were involved in completely separate tasks. The fourth graders continued to work on the autobiography that all fourth graders traditionally do at this school. While the fourth graders did independent work, Mr. East met with groups of fifth graders who were preparing presentations

on the thirteen original states in the United States. These presentations were done in cooperative groups. Each group had a certain number of states to research and report on, and they were to plan a way in which to present their findings to the other fifth graders. When it was time for a presentation, Mr. East told the hard-working fourth graders, "You can continue to write but you're welcome to listen, even though you'll do it next year. You've studied our state's history, so you'll know a bit. But if you need to work [on your autobiographies], please do." He told the fifth graders to listen carefully because they were going to be "responsible" for the information that they heard. After saying this, he assured the fourth graders that they could listen but that they would not be "responsible" for the information. At the beginning of the presentation, only two fourth graders listened; however, by the end of the presentation, they had all left their autobiographies and were listening to the fifth graders present their reports. After the lesson, Mr. East expressed concern about this decision. He said, "I let the fourth graders listen, I hope that they won't say next year, 'We've already done that'!" Mr. East feels most comfortable when he is following the mandated curricula for each grade level; however, he organizes instruction so that he will be able to follow the curricula while combining instruction as much as possible.

Ms. Ruth and the Curriculum

Finally, there is Ms. Ruth at Site D who teaches science to

all students together while dividing instruction for mathematics and occasionally for social studies. Ms. Ruth's second graders are a part of the third grade science program. For this program, the third grade teachers (who work as a team) devise bi-monthly science seminars for their students. An entire morning is usually devoted to these seminars during which visiting scientists talk with the students. Ms. Ruth teaches students separately for mathematics instruction because as with Mr. East, students all move to same-grade homogeneous groups during math time. Ms. Ruth attempts to combine social studies as much as possible by working on themes that are similar in the second and third grade curricula and devising different concentrations on the theme accordingly. For example, when her third graders were studying the Jackson County unit which is a part of the third grade curriculum, she highlighted biographies as a theme for reading workshop. She had her second graders concentrate on reading biographies of famous individuals from Jackson County while the third graders did more in-depth work on the county. Ms. Ruth is not completely comfortable with this arrangement, and she says that ideally a combination classroom teacher "might as well teach everyone together and expect different levels of difficulty" for different individuals. When talking about her ideal combination class, she states:

> Ideally I would have all the children working developmentally at their own paces without regard to grade levels, and I'd try to make the class

> as child-centered and intra-centered as possible, covering the curriculum, but not sticking to it if I thought there was something that we could go over in a series of classes that were of more interest to the children. I would not differentiate between grades in an ideal situation. I would integrate the children according to their interests rather than according to their grade-levels.

Ms. Ruth strongly believes that the curriculum should serve solely as a guide to a teacher. She said that she does follow the social studies and science curricula more closely than the language arts because she has "less expertise in these areas."

When talking about separating social studies instruction, she said that she felt that her "hands were tied" and that "it was hands-off in some areas." She states that, "I have worked within the parameters of some requests that were made to me by my third grade team mates not to extensively go into some content areas."

School and Community Atmosphere and the Combined Class

Ms. Ruth's frustrations lead to the final factor that determines the manner in which a teacher organizes his/her combined class. This factor is the atmosphere of the school and community that surrounds the school. The teachers at Site D work in teams that are made up of all the teachers of a particular grade level, and these teams meet weekly. Mr. East attends both the fourth and fifth grade team meetings while Ms. Ruth attends

only the third grade meetings. She says that she feels isolated because she is the only 2-3 combination in such a large school. She says that she would like to do more thematic teaching, but that it is difficult because she is the only 2-3. She feels pressure from the other teachers in the school to separate her class and to have them follow the curriculum as closely as possible. She also expresses concern that the other teachers request that her students be separated for field trips because each grade has traditional field trips and teachers fear repetition. Ms. Ruth explains,

> Being the only combination in a rather large school does put you in an isolated situation. It makes it a little more difficult to feel like you are part of a team.

Site D's Atmosphere

The atmosphere of the community around site D is one that puts much pressure on teachers and administration. The majority of the parents are affluent and well-educated, and thus have the time and the desire to be extremely involved in their children's education. This parental involvement has beneficial effects because it encourages the teachers and the school administration to initiate much positive communication with the parents. For example, at the beginning of the year, the principal and both Ms. Ruth and Mr. East held several meetings with parents to discuss their questions and concerns about the combination classes. Both teachers said that parents had many questions at the beginning of

the year, but that they received few complaints about the situation once the school year got underway. The school expected parental concern and avoided potential problems by facing this concern head-on. The teachers and administration were also willing to accommodate parental suggestions if possible. For example, parents of students in both grades were highly concerned about the social implications of a combined class. They wanted their children to have opportunities to socialize with their same-grade peers. Thus, the second-grade team changed its recess time to be the same as the third grade's so that Ms. Ruth's students could have recess with their same-grade peers. Mr. East and Ms. Ruth said that their principal was supportive and that she gave them "freedom" in their teaching.

Site A's Atmosphere

Mr. Smith has had many difficulties with his classroom organization because of the community in which his school serves. He received many negative reactions from "conservative" parents at the beginning of the year, and as a result, he said that he "spent the beginning of the year trying to prove to himself and others that this was a positive situation." As he reflects in the middle of the school year, he says, "Now I am just doing the best that I can, realizing it is flawed and not ideal." He says that many of the parental complaints are a result of a general atmosphere of "turmoil" that surrounded the school at the beginning of the year. The community's "favorite principal" was no longer in that position, and it was not until March that the

school found a permanent replacement. Mr. Smith believes that many parents were agitated because of this situation and that their discontentment simply spread to other areas, and they subsequently "latched on to any problem." Furthermore, Mr. Smith was new to the Jackson County school system at the beginning of the year, and he said that he felt "lost" upon learning that he had a combined class. Because Jackson County gives its teachers much freedom in their instruction, Mr. Smith said that it was difficult for him to pinpoint exactly what the system expected of him as teacher. He was unfamiliar with the ins and outs of the reading and writing workshop programs, and as the other third grade teacher at the school was also new, he says that it was difficult to find concrete aid. However, he says that he did find support in the other teachers at the school, for several of them had combined classes at that time or in the past. He also says that the new principal is very supportive and "encouraged" him to combine instruction for the two grades.

Site C's Atmosphere

Ms. Maple at Site C says that she feels "a bit isolated" because she is the only combination classroom teacher in her school but that her principal is "super supportive" and encourages her to combine instruction. Ms. Maple does not feel pressure from other teachers concerning the material that she covers in her class, and the school's atmosphere is positive and extremely relaxed (especially as compared to site D). Ms. Maple says that she has not experienced negative parental feedback

because of the combination organization. She says that one parent was concerned that his/her third grader was placed in the class because he/she was a low achiever; however, this parent's concerns were put to rest when Ms. Maple informed him/her that the placement was random. Ms. Maple explains that she suspects that several parents are probably unaware that their child is in a combined class because the parents either did not or could not read the letter that she sent home at the beginning of the year. This situation could be a result of the community which the school serves. This community is made up of mostly lower-income minority families, and many of the parents are not extremely involved in their child's education. However, Ms. Maple does solicit parent volunteerism; she has two parents who come in weekly to read to her class, and she says that this involvement is positive for all the children in the class.

Site B's Atmosphere

Finally, the atmosphere at Site B is one of positive excitement and innovation, Ms. Hope, Ms. New, and Ms. West are all eager to teach combinations together as a team again next year. The teachers say that the support that they get from working as a team is a large factor in their positive views of their combination classroom experiences. Ms. Hope said that her first year of teaching was "not too difficult because of the team and the wonderful school." She goes on to explain:

> I don't think that we would be so positive if we were isolated one [combination class] within a school. . .

> I wouldn't have been working so closely in a team if we hadn't been teaching the 2-3 combinations. We wanted to be very consistent, actually feeling like we had to band together in terms of making a front for the parents.

All three teachers said that their principal is a factor in the success of the situation. Ms. New says that he "allows them to develop as teachers by giving [them] freedom to do what [they] feel comfortable with." Because all the second and third grade classes are combined classes, the problem of parents wondering why their child was placed in a combined class is eliminated. The teachers say that many parents expressed concern at the open house that they held at the beginning of the year, but that complaints lessened as the year progressed. Ms. New says that "I feel like we've gotten a lot of positive strokes from other teachers in the county, but we don't get as much from the parents." Ms. West adds that "the parents are happy that their kids are happy, but they're not happy that we don't fit the mold." Ms. West says that she explained to parents that her class was to be a "community of learners" made up of unique individuals, and that most parents accepted this. The teachers are so positive about the situation, it would be difficult for any open-minded parent not to see its merits. In addition, all three teachers at site B use parent volunteers in their classes (especially to help during reading and writing workshop times). There was a parent volunteer in each class during each observation made at this school, and these parents only expressed

positive thoughts about their child's class!

RECOMMENDATIONS RESULTING FROM STUDY

After considering information collected in the literature review, interviews, and observations, several recommendations can be made concerning combined classes in Jackson County. These recommendations will also be valuable for other school systems which are considering employing combined classroom organization because of administrative reasons.

Communication

Open communication among administration, teachers, parents, and students is a key to successfully establishing multi-grade classes within the graded system. Principals and teachers should discuss the decision before it is made, and once the decision has been made, open communication should continue. As with the decision at Site B, principal and teachers should discuss the philosophic implications of their decision and attempt to establish sound educational theory and practice to accompany the philosophy. Research has found that combined classes are satisfactory alternatives to single-grade classes and that combined classes also have several advantages over single-grade classes (i.e. students have better attitudes toward "self, school, and peers;" older students have positive self-image resulting from acting a role models; lower grade-level students have better developed vocabularies than same-age counterparts in single-grade classes; individualized teaching methods). The principal and teachers should build upon these advantages so that

the combined class experience is regarded as a positive and unique opportunity by all involved. If the administration and teachers are convinced of the positive aspects of multi-grading, they will then be able to communicate these advantages to parents.

Open communication between parents and teachers is vital in establishing combined classroom organization. Teachers need to inform parents about their philosophies and teaching methods, and they should also be willing to respond to parental questions and concerns. When writing about her combination class experience, Jayne Freeman (1984) suggests, "however you decide to organize your combination class, inform parents of your methods or teaching goals before the year begins" (p. 54). For example, the principal and teachers at Site D talked extensively with parents about their multi-grade classes. The teachers answered questions and acted upon parental concerns when possible. Ms. Ruth even established a home-school journal in which parents could write their concerns and she could answer. In addition, teachers should be willing to hold informational sessions that will teach parents about the teaching techniques they employ in their combination class. Communication with parents should be copious and should continue throughout the year. Teachers should also seek positive parental involvement by encouraging parents to volunteer their time to help with classroom activities.

Finally, combined classroom teachers must be in constant communication with other combined classroom teachers as well as

single-grade teachers in their school. Teachers should work together to support and to aid one another. In fact, the most positive situation was found to be at site B where three combined classroom teachers work together as a team. All teachers in the school need to be involved in the combined classroom decision, or if this is not possible, they should at least be familiar with the philosophy and teaching methods that the combined classroom teachers will be employing. All teachers need to communicate and be flexible about scheduling and other logistical concerns. Teachers also need to communicate concerning instructional objectives and planning. The more communication among teachers the better!

A Community of Learners

Combined classrooms are most effective when the number of students from each grade is as equal as possible (i.e., 10 second graders and 10 third graders), for this gives the classroom a healthy balance. Data collected from observations, interviews and from literature suggests that multi-grade classes are most effective when students are taught together as a community of learners. Miller (1989) states that teaching the grades together fosters a community feeling among students and discourages a status hierarchy from developing between grades. The classes in which teachers never referred to grade names were also the classes in which teachers did not talk of social problems arising as a result of grade level; students had many cross-grade friendships and formed cross-grade cooperative learning groups.

On the other hand, teachers who used grade-name labels expressed concerns about social problems arising in class as a result of same-grade cliques and the absence of cross-grade friendships. Furthermore, teaching the group as a whole reduces a teacher's planning time in that he/she does not have to devise two lesson plans for each subject area. As the teacher makes an effort to teach his/her class as a community, he/she should simultaneously individualize instruction. The teacher should view each child as an individual with strengths and weaknesses, and the child's grade-name label should be of little consequence.

Thematic/Integrated Units

Those teachers who combined instruction for all their students through the use of thematic/integrated units were those who expressed the most excitement and enjoyment about their combined class. The teachers were given the freedom to be innovative, and as a result, both they and their students benefitted. When curriculum guides become more content-oriented and specific as the grades get higher, teachers can continue to teach thematically by finding similar areas in the curricula and teaching them to both grades simultaneously. Teachers can choose divergent issues (in which there is no right or wrong answer) for whole class instruction, and then move to more level-specific activities from there. Teachers should view the curriculum as a guide; they should ultimately rely on their own knowledge and innovation coupled with their students' interests for the majority of their planning. Finally, administration and teacher

education programs should provide teachers with training in the above teaching techniques as well as in various manners in which to organize combined classes. Ms. Ruth discusses her views of the training and support needed for the teaching of multi-grade classes:

> I think training is very important. I don't think that it is absolutely necessary for very experienced teachers, but I think it would be a paramount requirement for a new teacher because new teachers are going to be less secure, especially if they haven't taught several grade-levels. . .I think that it is also very important to have a support group. We've started one of those up this year. It hasn't gotten a lot of attendance, but I still think that it is important for teachers to have support.

Training will give teachers confidence to be creative and innovative in their teaching, and support will give the teachers opportunity to share their ideas with one another and to build upon their innovation. Combined classes provide teachers with the opportunity to leap from the base of curriculum guides and to build their own units using their students as the guides.

FUTURE STUDIES

Due to time limitations, this study is only the beginning of a larger, more in-depth study of combined classroom teachers and their classes. Ideally, I would have spent several days observing and interviewing each teacher in order to paint an even

more complete picture of each class; however, I will save that for the days ahead! As I visited the classes, ideas for future studies of combined classes continually popped into my head. Some future studies that I think would be very beneficial to all combined classroom teachers are:

-Student feelings and attitudes about being in combined classes.

-Parental views and attitudes about their child's combination class.

-Effects of educating parents about combination classes.

-Use of parents as volunteers in the combined class.

-Use of computers in combined classes.

-Teacher's views on what type of training is needed to teach a combination.

REFLECTIONS ON THIS STUDY

All in all, I find that combined classes are a very positive alternative to straight-grade classes in Jackson County elementary schools. Having a combined class pushes a teacher to view his/her students as individuals with strengths and weaknesses instead of viewing them as x-graders who do or do not perform at x-grade level. Teachers teach each individual at his/her developmental level without strict regard of his/her grade level, and because of the wide range of abilities that exists within the class, students on both ends of the ability spectrum are not so noticeably the "high" or the "low" students. As Ms. West so eloquently put it, "we teach the child, not the subject or the grade-level."

I would like to thank all seven teachers for allowing me to visit their classes and for taking time out of their busy schedules to talk with me. I would also like to thank Marti Owens for her support and guidance in this project!

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Appendix A: Reading/Writing Workshop

Reading and writing workshop is a method of organizing Language Arts instruction that features individualized teaching and active learning. In writing workshop, students are given the role of authors; they write on topics of their choice, and thus have ownership of their work. Students write following the writing process model. This process includes the steps of: prewriting (deciding on a topic), drafting and revising, conferencing with peers and teachers, editing, sharing, and publishing works. Each student works at his/her own pace, and it is expected that students will be at different steps of the writing process on any given day. Teachers teach writing skills during mini-lessons. Teachers decide the content of these lessons by determining common questions/problems among their students; only the students who need help with the skill being taught are obliged to attend the mini-lesson. Writing comes alive for students as they publish their works and share them with their class and the community beyond.

Reading workshop is also based on ideas of ownership and individualization. Students read trade-books of their choice and are then given various activities that they can perform in connection with their reading. An important aspect of reading workshop is simply giving students quality time to spend reading silently each day. After reading, students and teachers can write back and forth about their reading; students can give "book

talks" about their favorite books; students can perform puppet shows based on their reading, and the list of activities goes on. Possible sources for more in-depth information on reading and writing workshop include:

Atwell, Nancy. (1987). In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents.

Calkins, Lucy. (1986). The Art of Teaching Writing.

Graves, Donald. (1983). Writing: Teachers and Children at Work.

Combination Classroom Teachers
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Appendix B: Areas Covered in Teacher Interviews and Observations

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Teachers:

-Years taught?

-Multi-age before?

-Same grades before?

Multi-Grade Decision:

-Philosophical vs administrative reasons?

-When was the decision made?

-Student placement in class (random or selective)?

-Why did you get class?

-When did you find out?

-How did you feel?

-When/how were parents informed?

-Could parent request/refuse?

-General parental attitude?

-General perceived student attitude?

School Demographics:

-Location: (rural, poverty stricken, wealthy, things around school etc.)

-Condition of school building/grounds:

-Condition of inside of school: (decorated? in need of repair?)

-General school atmosphere: (teacher:student, teacher:teacher, teacher:principal relations etc.)

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-Number of students, Number of teachers:

-Characteristics of student population (socioeconomic, economic, etc):

-Average student:teacher ratio:

INSTRUCTIONAL ORGANIZATION

Behavior Management

-Beginning of year procedures: (rules, explanation of set-up to students, etc.)

-Rules/procedures (any special considerations for a multi-age group?)

Instructional Organization and Curriculum

-Schedule of a typical day (*PE, recess, lunchtime)

-Competitive, individualistic or cooperative goal strategies? (multi-dimensional class?)

-Content areas: (teach grades together or separately?)

Language Arts:

Mathematics:

Social Studies:

Science:

Methods of Teaching/Grouping

-Whole class vs individual and small group: (how does teacher decide when to use which?)

-Whole class instruction (convergent vs divergent?)

-Individualized instruction (is more than in a single-grade class?)

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-Process vs content

-Grouping strategies (heterogeneous vs homogeneous)

-Use of cooperative learning

-Use of cross-age tutoring

-Use of integrated units/thematic teaching

-Other positive/negative aspects---suggestions-----etc